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AUTHOR Weihs, Otto
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ABSTRACT

Theories of human cognition and language suggest that there is a gap between the phases of perception and the phases of production of language. Unfortunately, this is often forgotten in language teaching, so that beginners' courses too frequently contain simplified and non-authentic linguistic input to assure that output does not lag too far behind. It would be better to look at language learning as consisting of stages. Both the "authentic" approach and the "analytical" approach have four stages characterized by the mode of learning, ways of learning, degree of adequacy, and goal. The goal of the authentic approach is fluency and content-oriented comprehension, while the goal of the analytical approach is accuracy and awareness of linguistic form and meaning; the two approaches differ in each of the other dimensions. Evidence from practical and theoretical research supports the use of a combination of these approaches in the classroom. (MSE)

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Dr.Otto Weihs
Medeagasse 6/10
A-1100 Vienna/Austria

MODULAR LEARNING AND LANGUAGE GROWTH

1. The dilemma in FLT

It seems that foreign language teaching - both in secondary and in adult education - is in need of further development. This would perhaps not be all that surprising were it not for the revival or re-discovery of some 'old' concepts like those of Descartes, Kant, W.von Humboldt, Piaget and others that seem to bring about new perspectives in the learning and teaching of foreign languages.

But have we not just experienced the revolutionary epoch of "communicative language teaching" including international projects and their offspring (cf. Modern Languages Project by the Council of Europe, "T-Level") ?

There is certainly no denying the valuable contributions -among which I reckon learner-centredness to be the most vital one - that have been made over the last decade or so by what have been called the "functional", "notional", "functional-notional" or "communicative approaches". And yet, I believe that their methodology/ies have not developed much beyond those concepts of human learning which still are very behaviouristic in principle.

One of the major reasons for this dilemma seems to have been the preoccupation with enumerating speech-acts and with defining and listing learning objectives. Thus, the questions of how human beings learn in general and acquire language in particular as well as of what can be inferred from our neurophysiological disposition tended to remain largely neglected. Even 'alternative' and so-called humanistic approaches such as TPR or Psychodrama do not seem to go much beyond the externalisation of language behaviour, whereas others, like Suggestopedia, mainly emphasize only one of the many aspects of the process of foreign language learning, e.g. memory.

As for the understanding of the teacher's job and their practical work in the classroom the results should be worrying. One of the most

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striking consequences has been a growing disinterest among many teachers as far as the relationship between theoretical principle and practical experience is concerned (cf. Brumfit 1984). The criteria that are often applied for designing lesson plans, etc. are the degree of (mostly explicit) activity and the element of (short-lived) 'pleasure-rousing' amongst the learners. Of course, there is nothing to be said against having fun while learning. Yet, the outcome of most foreign language teaching tends to rely more on the entertaining talent of the teacher than on principled considerations of what is basically right or wrong in language learning - at least as far as we can tell today.

Additionally, and this makes it even worse, "...in most teacher training and orientation programmes, theory and practice are kept apart and are even listed as separate components of the training curriculum!" Teachers/trainees would become exposed to various concepts of language learning through lectures and reading assignments while in so-called practice sessions they are to use particular "techniques without being required to understand the theoretical assumptions underlying them". As a consequence, Ramani argues as well, "teachers often see themselves as 'practitioners' who have little or nothing to do with theory". (Ramani 1987:3)

2. On modular language growth

It was this dilemma that made us* consider a shift of emphasis in foreign language learning. However, our considerations did not spring from a market-oriented response to the demand that - according to some survey ,for example - a complex and natural approach to language learning is best liked by the learners. They are much more a response to both our insights from our own teaching experiences and our findings from various areas, all of them related to or explicitly dealing with language and its learning.

Among those are concepts of human thinking and being (Descartes, Kant, Humboldt) and, consequently, concepts of universal grammar as formulated by Chomsky. Then there is cognitive psychology, e.g. J.Fodor's modularity thesis, some of Terrell and Krashen's Natural Approach hypotheses as well as some notions from Gestalt psychology and -probably more by chance than

by intention - ideas from community language learning and neurolinguistic programming.

A major conclusion that can be drawn from them is a clear-cut differentiation between phases of perception and phases of production. This is corroborated by psycholinguistic assumptions about the in-built capacity of creating a rule-governed system on our own (cf. the notion of the "Language Acquisition Device") and by neurological evidence that the human mind, inclusive of our language faculty, works on a modular basis, i.e. various modules have particular functions, e.g. perception and production, which are themselves divided into "sub-modules".

For language learning it can be convincingly claimed that perceiving and comprehending data in a more general ("authentic") and a more specific "analytical") way is prior to merely producing language forms and/or speech acts or to adhering almost exclusively to situational pragmatics.

Unfortunately, it is very often forgotten in teaching that there is a most natural time lag and quantity gap between what is perceived and what is to be produced by the learners. Many beginners' courses only too readily neglect this fact. They, then, end up with 'simplified' and therefore non-authentic linguistic input in order to ensure that the learners' 'output' should not lag behind the 'input'.

We would rather propose the following sequence of "authentic" and "analytical" stages of learning that can be more precisely characterized by the dimensions of MODE OF LEARNING; WAYS OF LEARNING; DEGREE OF ADEQUACY and GOAL:

ACQUIRING AND LEARNING LANGUAGE

	"AUTHENTIC" APPROACH	*"ANALYTICAL" APPROACH*
MODE OF LEARNING (How we learn)	*INTER-MODULAR*	*INTRA-MODULAR*
WAYS OF LEARNING (means by which we learn)	*CONFRONTATION WITH AND TAKING ON "REAL" SITUATIONS*	*OBSERVATION INTENSIVE PRACTICE*
DEGREE OF ADEQUACY (for language use)	*HIGH*	*LOW*
GOAL	*FLUENCY AND CONTENT -ORIENTED COMPREHENSION*	*ACCURACY AND AWARENESS OF LINGUISTIC FORM AND MEANING*

From our findings, both practical and theoretical, we were allowed to construct a body of the following claims for foreign language LEARNING:

- o Provision of a rich linguistic environment in which the "rule-governed creativity" of the leanguage learner can come into full play, which will allow for
- o interaction with "primary linguistic data" in order to generate the innate language learning capacity of humans (cf. Language Acquisition Device). This interaction between an (in-built) body of information and linguistic data seems to work in a computational way making use of the modular set-up of the human brain (cf. inter-modular and intra-modular modes of learning).
- o "top-down processing", a principle taken over from Gestalt psychology, which, in a language learning context, implies that the levels of syntax and semantics, including discourse, are, for example, prior to the levels of morphology and phonology. This also includes giving priority to the natural in-built grammar every language learner possesses and excludes pre-selective step-by-step programmes that allegedly progress from the more simple to the more complex. The ability to construct for oneself an abstract grammar of underlying principles as a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence leads us to
- o pattern detection from realistic confusion rather than from edited, i.e. artificially constructed clarity and simplicity and we would therefore claim
- o preference for authentic perception and production of both oral and written texts over pre-structured text exploration. It should be emphasized here that many new courses and textbooks of the "communicative era" do make use of authentic texts, but they do so in order to create a quasi-authentic atmosphere rather than to base the actual learning processes on these texts. We would therefore like to put
- o emphasis on content-oriented and form-oriented activities based on (semi-) authentic material into which the conventional division of skills into listening, speaking, reading and writing may be integrated.

We, therefore, distinguish between the following major types of activities:

1. "authentic tasks": these are activitiesthat practise real communicative situations with a minimal degree of instruction. The learner searches for and produces linguistic meaning in order to communicate effectively (authentic listening/ non-guided speaking; authentic reading/non-guided writing)
2. "reconstruction and construction tasks": from the stage of an approximate understanding and producing the learner here proceeds to a stage where s/he systematizes her/his impressions and intuitions (e.g. dialogue reconstruction and dialogue building).
3. "analytical tasks": these are based on the assumption that you learn about a subject more easily if you survey it at the start (see authentic tasks) and then work your way down to the details which can be of various kinds, e.g. phonological,morphological, lexical, textual, etc.

Within the language learning process the first two types of tasks probably are at the centre of language growth, whereas the analytical tasks mainly serve the purpose of structuring and storing what has already been learnt before. And, language learning very often takes place incidentally, i.e. you may also learn about a language problem without actually thinking about it. In order to promote this

- the learner should experience a systematic change of cognitive and affective activities and should have the opportunity to communicate as much as possible about her/his learning tasks and achievements.
- In a low-anxiety situation the learner should be in the position to determine and evaluate her/his individual learning strategies and progress.

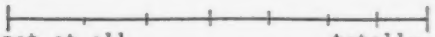
3. And what about language teaching ?

We believe that this approach demands a high degree of non-directiveness on the part of the teacher to allow for the autonomy of her/his learners. Only in this way will the learners want to

make use of their overall (linguistic) learning potential and will thus be enabled to deal with their language learning more naturally and therefore more efficiently ("it is as if the language (English) would grow within myself"**) than by means of an approach that is mainly founded on teacher-stimulated learner participation by means of more or less sophisticated techniques of animation.

Observation criteria of the following kind may help to conceptualize the teaching practices and thus to narrow the gap between theory and practice

HOW DOES THE TEACHER CONTROL THE SEQUENCE?



not at all — totally

HOW OFTEN DOES THE TEACHER PROVIDE IMPETUS FOR AUTONOMOUS WORK?

never — very often

HOW DOES THE TEACHER PROVIDE INFORMATION?

automatically — on request

HOW DID YOU EXPERIENCE THE TEACHER'S SUGGESTIONS?

directive — non-directive

NOTE THE (EYE) CONTACT BETWEEN LEARNERS AND/OR THE TEACHER

T always in the centre — T practically non-existent

WHAT CAN YOU SAY ABOUT THE OVERALL ATMOSPHERE?

This discussion clearly goes beyond the issues of language learning to a consideration of language teaching and teacher training. It is, however, self-evident, that both teaching and teacher training are eminently influenced by an application of the apporach we

advocate. As Stern (1983: 27) so aptly stated:

> *No language teacher - however strenuously he may deny his interest in theory - can teach a language without a theory of language teaching, even if it is only implicit in value judgements, decisions, and actions, or in the organisational pattern within which she/he operates.*
> *However, it is important ... to advance ... to a more conscious understanding of the assumptions, principles, and concepts underlying one's actions.*

Our hypotheses about the structure of the human mind and its working may be falsified over the course of time. However, taking these 'old' concepts and 'new' findings seriously into consideration may lead foreign language learning/teaching out of the cul-de-sac in which it is today.

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* Alfred Knapp (teaches French at university and VHS), Susanna Buttaroni (responsible for Italian) and myself.

** Remark by a course participant in an English course for adult beginners.

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